

New British Philosophy

Edited by Julian Baggini and Jeremy Stangroom



LONDON AND NEW YORK

Contents

The Philosophers	vii
Preface	ix
Introduction	1
1 Philosophical Biography Ray Monk	9
2 Ethics in the Modern World Roger Crisp	27
3 The Role of Political Philosophy Jonathan Wolff	43
4 Aesthetics and Music Aaron Ridley	59
5 Power, Knowledge and Injustice Miranda Fricker	77
6 Feminism and Pornography Rae Langton	95
7 Mind Matters Tim Crane	113
8 The Concerns of Analytic Philosophy Michael Martin	129
9 On Vagueness Timothy Williamson	147
10 The Rebirth of Metaphysics Robin Le Poidevin	165
11 Continental Philosophy and Emancipation Simon Critchley	183
12 The Analytic and the Continental Simon Glendinning	201
13 Sartre's Existentialism Christina Howells	219
14 Post-Analytic Philosophy Stephen Mulhall	237
15 A Post-Human Hell Keith Ansell Pearson	253
16 Philosophy and the Public Nigel Warburton	271
Appendix: Rationale and Purpose	287
Further Reading	293
Index	295

Introduction

Contemporary Britain is fascinated by the nation's cultural barometer. The rise and fall of Britpop is charted in the broadsheet press as well as in the music glossies. People who rarely step inside an art gallery watch with fascination the progress of Tracey Emin, Gavin Turk, Damien Hurst and the rest of the Britart pack. The publication of *Granta's* Best Young British Writers list also commands the attention of those who never have and never will read a single novel by any of the mentioned authors. And the fortunes of the British film industry, which ebb and flow with remarkable rapidity, are followed nearly as closely as those of the financial markets.

However, what is perhaps more interesting is which aspects of our culture escape our attention. When the *New Statesman* published its Best of Young Britain edition in July 2001, philosophers were conspicuous by their absence. Philosophers are among those who rarely move into the spotlight of popular scrutiny, and there are many explanations that can be given to account for this. Philosophy is, on the whole, slower moving than the arts. The trajectories of its star players follow more gently inclining, and declining, paths. Philosophers don't generally write with a broad public audience in mind – most of their work is directed at their professional peers. And philosophy is largely pursued within academia, a world not exactly designed to stir the hearts of the fashion-conscious mass media.

But there is a sense in which this lack of general awareness of the work of philosophers is regrettable. Despite the image of British philosophy during much of the twentieth century as a dry, stuffy, irrelevant discipline, the subject today is vibrant, diverse and thriving. Despite complaints about the restrictive and prescriptive nature of academic life, many young philosophers are managing to thrive within this hot-house and produce original and compelling work. What's more, key players are interested in presenting their work to a wider audience as well as to their fellow professionals. The result is that British philosophy today speaks to more people than at any time in its past.

There are several reasons for this. One is the increasing diversity of the subject. For many years, there were very few philosophy departments in Britain, and a few key centres dominated. This created, if not a hegemony, a kind of oligarchy, with the philosophers of Oxford, Cambridge and London very much setting the agenda for philosophy in the whole country. Now there are many more regional centres and greater scope for different styles of philosophy to flourish. Continental, post-analytic, feminist, interdisciplinary and applied philosophy all thrive where previously they were confined to the margins or not included at all.

There is also an increasing tendency to traverse the boundaries which previously separated particular schools of philosophy. More philosophers are drawing on contemporary work from both continental Europe and Britain, where before their interests were located in one or the other.

Philosophers have also become increasingly concerned to relate their work to what is going on in the 'real world'. This takes several forms. We have the continued rise of applied philosophy, with serious work being produced on bioethics, business ethics and public policy, for example. We have also seen more philosophers writing for the

general public. That two Cambridge professors, Edward Craig and Simon Blackburn, should both be writing books for this readership is the most visible sign of a change of perception as to where the audience for philosophy may be.

The overall effect of these changes in British philosophy has been to make the subject more diverse, more exciting and more relevant to the concerns of more people. However, this change has gone largely unnoticed in the outside world. This is partly because of the traditional British disdain for the intellectual and partly because of the lack of nous of philosophers when it comes to communicating with a wider audience. It is also because there have been few opportunities for British philosophy to present itself to the outside world. There have been plenty of introductions to philosophy, but few opportunities to show off the work that is being done right here, right now.

One aim of this volume is to provide such a showcase. We believe that this is a particularly interesting time for British philosophy and that there are many people who will be stimulated, challenged and invigorated by reading what it has to offer. We do not expect the philosophers in this volume to become household names like Damon Albarn, Danny Boyle and Esther Freud, but we do think that what they have to say is of interest to many more people than just those taking philosophy degrees.

The State of British Philosophy

This book contains sixteen interviews with a wide range of British philosophers. Our selection is designed to show a representative range of the talents and interests among the generation of philosophers who are the heirs to the subject's aristocracy. We say more about how and why we chose the philosophers we did in the

appendix. Here, we want to consider what the final list tells us about British philosophy today.

One striking feature is that, of the sixteen, only three are women. This does seem to be an accurate reflection of the state of British philosophy. For example, at the 2000 'Joint Session', the major UK conference for general philosophy, men outnumbered women by three to one. On the main programme, of the fifteen speakers only two were women, while just two out of the eight session chairs were women. There are signs of change, with many more young women holding academic positions and coming up through graduate studies. There has also been something of a breakthrough at Birkbeck College, London, where now nearly half its faculty are women philosophers. But at the present time, the number of women in this book reflects the sad truth that British philosophy has for a long time been dominated by males.

There are no black or minority ethnic philosophers in this book. Again, this just seems to be an accurate reflection of the demography of the subject. At the 'Joint Session' conference mentioned earlier, there were no black faces to be seen among the 150-odd delegates. For whatever reason, the subject has continued to attract predominantly white people.

There is, then, a sense in which the new diversity of British philosophy is limited. There may be fewer boundaries, more styles of philosophy being practised and more interdisciplinary work going on, but it is still mainly being done by white males (as this book was written and compiled by white males).

The geographical spread is also interesting. Half the interviewees come from the traditional bastions of the British philosophical establishment, the so-called 'golden triangle' of the universities of London, Oxford and Cambridge. But the other half come from a wide range of institutions: Warwick, Essex, Reading, Southampton, Leeds, Edinburgh

and the Open University. This reflects the way in which regional centres of philosophy have increased in their importance. While the golden triangle still dominates, it is now possible to reach the top of the profession elsewhere.

The range of subjects covered in the interviews is also instructive. Several of the interviews cover what is known as 'continental' philosophy, by which is generally meant twentieth century French and German philosophy. Although the proportion of this kind of philosophy represented here is probably higher than the proportion of such philosophy researched and studied in British universities, it is nonetheless the case that more work is being done in continental philosophy than ever before. Further, as several interviewees make clear, the whole distinction between Anglo-American and continental philosophy has been problematised, with at least some now arguing that there is no fundamental distinction to be made between them.

This is a remarkable turnaround, when one considers that as recently as 1992, a proposal by Cambridge University to award an honorary degree to the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida led to a petition being signed against it. Professor Barry Smith, in a letter to *The Times*, expressed a sentiment often voiced about continental philosophy in general, when he wrote: 'In the eyes of philosophers, and certainly among those working in leading departments of philosophy throughout the world, M. Derrida's work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour.'

It would be untrue to suggest that there is not still hostility from many British philosophers to their continental counterparts, but there are many more seeking a rapprochement now than there were a decade ago.

The topics covered in this book reflect much of the work which is now going on in philosophy. Many familiar topics are included:

philosophy of mind, aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, feminist theory and epistemology. Other interviews focus on styles of philosophy, such as the analytic, the continental and the post-analytic. We have also included a discussion about the popularisation of philosophy, because although this is not a topic in philosophy as such, it is a matter of increasing concern to philosophers who are seeking a wider audience for their work. Also represented is the emerging subject of philosophical biography.

Of course, this does not provide a comprehensive selection of all that is going on in the subject. There are no interviews on the philosophy of science, ancient philosophy or the history of philosophy, for instance. We make no apology for this. In order to keep the book down to a manageable size, some aspects of British philosophy were going to be left out which in an ideal world would not have been.

If the selection of people and topics in this book does not amount to a detailed anatomical drawing of the body of British philosophy today, it is also more than a mere snapshot of it. This volume should provide the reader with an accurate, if incomplete, impression of what philosophy in Britain is like today. Moreover, we hope that it will also give a sense of what philosophy will be like tomorrow, when the philosophers interviewed here, if they haven't already done so, take up their places at the very top of the profession.

How to Read this Book

The interviews have been arranged so that there is a natural progression in theme from one to the other. Each is preceded by a short introduction written by Baggini and Stangroom which provides some context for the discussion that follows. After each interview, a select bibliography includes five writings by the interviewee for those

interested in reading more about their work. It is also possible to read any of the interviews independently of the others, or skip some altogether, although we do not, of course, advise that you do.

To facilitate flowing discussions, we did not ask interviewees to explain every difficult reference or allusion. Nor did we want to weigh down the text with explanatory footnotes. It should always be possible to follow the discussion without prior knowledge. But given the broad range of topics discussed, readers should expect the odd word, name, term of art or phrase to fly harmlessly over their heads, as they did on occasion with the interviewees.

1 Philosophical Biography

In conversation with Ray Monk

British philosophy has not traditionally taken much of an interest in the lives of its great figures. A recent graduate in the subject is likely to be familiar only with a few choice anecdotes, some apocryphal, some true.

So, for example, they may know that Nietzsche went mad, not because of his philosophy, but because of syphilis, and that his final breakdown saw him hugging an ass, sobbing; that Kant lived his whole life in Königsberg, where his walks were so regular that the women of the town set their clocks by them; that Wittgenstein once threatened Popper with a poker; that Descartes died prematurely when he contracted pneumonia while visiting Queen Christina of Sweden; that Socrates was condemned to death for corrupting the youth of Athens; and that Diogenes lived in a barrel and masturbated in public.

Biographical information about philosophers thus serves as no more than an amusing diversion. Give us anecdotes and tales of amusing foibles, but please, do not think biography could be important to philosophy itself.

This lack of interest in the lives of philosophers has its counterpart in the subject's history. The history of philosophy tends to be studied as if it were no more than an extended argument, a great conversation begun by Plato and Aristotle and continued up until the present day.

What does not get examined very often is the historical context within which the philosophers worked. The best scholars have always attended to these social and cultural factors, but more often than not they get placed to one side, especially in the teaching of the subject. Whereas it is commonplace in, say, the teaching of literature to begin a course on the nineteenth century novel with an examination of the society and culture of the time, a course on Descartes is more likely to begin with the text itself, or at most a reference to its philosophical antecedents.

What explains this relative lack of biographical and historical interest in British philosophy? Certain feminist critics argue that it is a product of a masculine conception of philosophy, where the self and the intellect are seen as independent, free-floating and autonomous. Men, who have denied the links between their intellectual pursuits and their bodies, gender and position in society, have dominated philosophy. Women, it is argued, are far more aware of the intimate link between how one thinks and rationalises, and one's nature as an embodied, socially and historically located individual. The ahistorical and non-biographical trend in philosophy merely reflects the male delusion that reason can be, and often is, separated from the individuals and societies within which it operates.

Whether or not one agrees wholeheartedly with this critique, at least part of it is undeniably true. That is to say, it is at least possible that what at first glance may appear to be detached, unbiased reasoning is largely a product of specific personal and social influences. Whether this undermines the philosophy or not is a further question. Whatever the answer to it, it does suggest that insight can be gained into the arguments of a philosopher by attending to those facts of their life and times.

Ray Monk is one of the few philosophers working in Britain today who has taken philosophical biography seriously. There are several

biographies of philosophers available, but Monk's work stands out. For Monk, biography is not a diversion, but his core work. The bibliographies of many scholars contain a biography or two, but for Monk, biography has dominated his professional output for the best part of two decades, resulting in a life of Wittgenstein and two volumes on Bertrand Russell. These biographies are intended not only to tell interesting stories for their own sake, but to cast light on the philosophy of their subjects. Monk has related life and thought in a way which is extremely unusual in the British philosophical tradition. He is, therefore, something of a pioneer and it will be interesting to see whether one consequence of this is that we will see more philosophical biography in the twenty-first century than we did in the twentieth.

Philosophical biography is a specialism which didn't exist when you began your career. So how did you end up specialising in a specialism that didn't exist?

My postgraduate work was on Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics, and the way I got into biography was that I became convinced that almost all of the secondary literature on Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics misunderstood it. It misunderstood it in a particular kind of way. I felt that what was needed to correct the misunderstanding wasn't arguing piecemeal against one view after the other. It seemed to me that what was being missed was what you might call the spirit in which Wittgenstein wrote. It also seemed to me reading Wittgenstein, particularly the various draft prefaces he wrote to *Philosophical Remarks*, that he felt that acutely too. He felt that even the people who understood in a detailed way his views on this, that and the other, had missed his attitude to these questions. It seemed to me that one way of

getting across the spirit in which Wittgenstein wrote would be to describe the life and the work alongside each other, so that one could read his work informed by some understanding of how he was writing and what attitudes were informing it.

That's interesting, because the philosophy of mathematics is one of the most abstract parts of philosophy and is therefore one which you would imagine you could treat with the least reference to a person's particular life.

In general that might be true, but in Wittgenstein's case it isn't. Some of his most passionate writing is on mathematics. He didn't just have an argument against logicism. He hated logicism. He described logicism as a cancerous growth. He talks about the disastrous invasion of mathematics by logic. Why did he feel so strongly about that? Because it's a symptom of what he perceived to be a more general cultural degeneration. When one understands that, one sees those remarks and the tone of them in the right context.

When you started out doing the philosophy of mathematics, presumably the way you were being taught and led did not push you towards the lives of the people behind it. So when you came to see those lives as important, did that seem like a major switch in the way you were thinking?

No. In my own case it went hand in hand with a more general disenchantment with academic philosophy. I left academic philosophy and did other things.

What was the root of the disenchantment?

The feeling that nothing serious was being said or entertained, but that a series of intellectual games were being pursued as a career.

Do you think that's still the case with most academic philosophy?

I think it's got a lot better. I'm talking now about the early 1980s, when I think British analytic philosophy was at its most arid. I went to a series of seminars in which the problem of adverbial predication was being discussed. This went on for about eight weeks, and the issue being discussed was this: if you say 'John walked up the hill slowly' it follows that John walked up the hill. If you say 'John walked up the hill quickly' it also follows that John walked up the hill. However, 'John walked up the hill slowly' implies not-'John walked up the hill quickly', and the problem was to devise a way of preserving those inferential relations. Well, what interest does this have? I found myself thinking that the pleasure one derives from those kinds of problems has no more depth to it than the pleasure one derives from a crossword puzzle.

You obviously admire Russell's early work in the philosophy of mathematics, and some people might ask what the point of that is – trying to explain how all of mathematics can be explained purely in terms of logic. That might also seem to be a nice intellectual game to play.

But one has to understand what he thought he was doing. He thought that he was laying bare the most general features of reality. We don't believe he was doing that, but if we did, it would be a tremendously important thing. The people pursuing adverbial predication were not animated by the passion that Russell was animated by, which is the feeling that they're discovering something about reality. That seemed to me missing. What was going on here was that an intellectual puzzle was being pursued because it was a diverting intellectual puzzle.

Does it really matter what's motivating people? You seem to be saying that the motivation is important to the value of the end

product. Some people might be motivated purely in the way that someone else is motivated by a crossword puzzle, but you don't know where these things will lead in philosophy. It's always worth going away and studying these things, because what might look like a bit of scholastic debate might actually end up leading to something which crucially changes our understanding.

Yes, but you're asking why I was disenchanted with analytic philosophy. It was because of the motivation, not the end result. I didn't feel part of a community that was interested in understanding things worth understanding.

Thinking a little more about how learning about someone's life might help you understand their philosophy, it might seem surprising that it is even possible. For example, you wouldn't think you would learn something important about quantum theory by looking at the lives of scientists who formulated it. So you wouldn't see there being any scientific interest in the lives of scientists. Where is the philosophical interest in the lives of philosophers?

It varies from philosopher to philosopher, I think. It's almost certainly not true that light can be shed on every philosopher's work by consideration of their life. I've yet to read anything about Kant's life that was enormously revealing about his work, whereas I think with Wittgenstein and Russell, much can be learned in different ways by looking at their work in the context of their lives.

With Wittgenstein, you talked about the spirit of his work. What is that spirit of his life and work?

It's summed up in the remark 'logic and ethics are fundamentally the same'. There are two very striking facts about Wittgenstein. On the ethics side, he pared his life down to the minimum, so as to make as

central as possible his search for decency, the drive to be a decent person. That is one of the most conspicuous and striking things about Wittgenstein. Whether you think he was a decent person or not, you can see that a lot of things he did were motivated by this drive. On the logic side, he had a relentless drive for clarity. It seems to me that in Wittgenstein's case, one can see that these are two sides of the same coin, that he thought one couldn't achieve clarity unless one achieved decency. He remarked to Russell that thinking about logic and thinking about his sins were simultaneous. In a remark in a letter to Russell, he asks, 'How can I be a logician before I'm a decent human being?' He thought what got in the way of thinking clearly was as often as not vanity, a refusal to come clean with oneself.

To acknowledge that helps understand where the philosophy is coming from and what's motivating it. It's presumably a fallacy to move from that to saying that you can actually judge the philosophical end result by looking at the biography. Would you want to maintain the traditional view that the validity or otherwise of the philosophical position can be judged independently of any facts about the life of the philosopher?

Well, yes. But often what that shows is how little is gained by judging the validity of a philosophical position. But surely it's true that whether the proofs of the *Principia* are valid or not cannot in any way depend on any facts about Russell's life.

You've indicated that there are limitations on judging validity. Some might think that's all you have to do. If we talk about arguments being sound rather than valid, you might think all you have to do is look at the arguments and if they work, they work, and if they don't, they don't – end of philosophy.

No, I don't think so. Philosophy would be a very arid business if that were the case. The great philosophers are those with insight, insight into something important. Of course, when one's teaching students, one says 'Don't just give me your conclusion, give me arguments'. But who reads Nietzsche, who reads Wittgenstein, who reads Kierkegaard, laying it out as if it were a piece of propositional calculus, and says this argument goes through or it doesn't? It would be impossibly boring and would miss the point.

A problem with training students in the way that we do is that we encourage them to be concerned with whether an argument is valid or not, and we don't encourage them very much to consider the question of whether the argument is interesting or not. You can see the results of that in academic journals. When I'm sent articles to provide a reader's report on for journals, more often than not the editor will want to know: Does this article show that the person is up to date with the reading? Is this argument a novel contribution to the literature? Is this argument sound? They don't want to know if it's very boring.

Let's turn to your first biography of Wittgenstein. He's a great subject in lots of ways because he led a very singular life, yet he also conforms to the stereotype of the tortured genius. There's a remark he makes on his death bed which is perhaps surprising given what's come before. He says, 'Tell them I've had a wonderful life'. How does that fit in with the fact that he seemed to have had a remarkably difficult, troubled life? Did it surprise you when you first heard of it?

It didn't surprise me particularly. One would be loath to regard that as Wittgenstein's definitive comment, a summation of his life. It was a remark made at a particular moment, for a particular audience; tell *them* I've had a wonderful life. It seemed to me the kind of thing that

Wittgenstein would want said to his closest friends. But I also think he thought he had indeed, in some ways, had a wonderful life. And indeed it was a wonderful life.

In what respects? Not in the sense that it was more enjoyable than most, for example.

No, but Wittgenstein achieved a kind of purity of purpose that very few of us achieve. That's one of the things that makes him so fascinating. A lot of the things that occupy my time – about my kids, about my mortgage, about day to day life – Wittgenstein successfully eliminated from his life, and that gives his life a kind of archetypal purity and concentration. There's something wonderful about that. It would have surprised me if he had said, 'Tell them I've had a happy life'.

Something strikes me as similar about Wittgenstein and Russell's philosophical lives and careers. Both in their earlier philosophies were trying to set out something that was pretty systematic and logically complete, in different spheres. They then came to see these attempts as failures, though how they moved on from that differed. Did it colour your view of the subject when you looked at two of the greatest philosophical minds of the last century and saw that they both, for different reasons, came to the conclusion that it was not possible to give a fully consistent, systemised account of key major areas in philosophy?

I don't think so. Perhaps it confirmed my view of philosophy. It does make them particularly interesting figures, because one then wants to understand what hopes were being thwarted. The hope that was being thwarted in Wittgenstein's case was the hope of achieving complete crystalline clarity, and the hope that was being thwarted in Russell's case was the hope of achieving complete certainty. I think there's

something revealing in that contrast about why we do philosophy. Do we do philosophy because we want absolutely certain foundations for everything we believe, as Russell did; or do we do philosophy because we feel it muddled, a bit confused, and we want this confusion dispelled?

Both of these people, whose abilities outstrip those of most of us, concluded that we couldn't have either of those things. Have the consequences of those failures been taken to heart by philosophers practising today?

I'm not sure I see philosophy like that, as it were, learning from other people's mistakes. Perhaps you could. But what would taking that on board mean? It might mean going through that process yourself. It doesn't go without saying that you could take up where Wittgenstein left off. To understand Wittgenstein or Russell's work, you might have to be tempted by the aspirations that motivated them and then perhaps see that this complete certainty, this complete clarity, is a chimera.

Did you share either of those motivations when you first got into philosophy?

More Wittgenstein's than Russell's. More to do with wanting clarity than certainty.

How has that been shaped by your studies, particularly of Wittgenstein? How have you come out the other end of that?

I suppose by thinking that clarification is a process, not a state. This is wherein lies the virtue of philosophy, despite all the boring stuff which is done in its name. Why do we do philosophy? Because there is a process of clarification and this is a good thing. A really good tutorial session, a really good seminar, is when the students come with some-

thing which is bothering them and they leave the room slightly clearer about what that is than before. But they haven't achieved any final state. Hopefully, what they've done is think through something which is now a bit clearer.

Wittgenstein's reaction to his earlier failure was to come back with a different type of philosophy. The work of the later Wittgenstein really does divide people. There are people who worship the man and others who despise him. But both of them might agree that Wittgenstein in a sense turned his back on philosophy as we know it. How radical do you think his break with the philosophical tradition he had both been educated in and contributed to was?

Very radical indeed, to the point where, to be a Wittgensteinian philosopher, in the sense of the late Wittgenstein is more or less incompatible with pursuing philosophy as a career.

Would you consider yourself to be a Wittgensteinian in that sense?

I think one of the important lessons to be learned from the later Wittgenstein is that philosophy is not a science and not a bit like a science. Philosophy is a process and as such the apparatus that goes with a modern academic discipline sits very uneasily on philosophy. A Ph.D. degree, for example, has some kind of sense in science. If you imagine science as putting little building blocks in place, you can see a Ph.D. degree as making a contribution to that structure. In philosophy, we have the form but not the content. People do Ph.D. degrees, and it's supposed to be that they make a contribution to the literature, they put another little brick in place in the structure, but actually this makes no sense at all in philosophy. The same is true with what's described as 'the literature' – contributing papers to academic journals. All that implicitly assumes that there is a structure being

built, and there just isn't in philosophy, if one takes a Wittgensteinian view of it.

The reason I'm interested in this is that you haven't rejected academic philosophy entirely, in that you have an academic position, but at the same time you have a lot of sympathy for Wittgenstein. I wonder whether there's a certain balancing act going on here and how comfortable you are with it.

Well, the answer is that there is a balancing act going on and that there are many aspects of academic life that I'm uncomfortable with. Research assessment, the way articles are published, the way degrees are given – actually most of it!

So what keeps you in it?

Because it's where philosophy goes on. It needn't be. There's no reason why what I value in philosophy can't go on outside academic life. But as it happens, if you want to pursue philosophy and teach philosophy, then you end up in an academic life.

Turning to Russell, he was clearly a very able philosopher. But outside of the particular area of the philosophy of mathematics, he didn't seem to do very well at all. His political reasoning seemed to be extremely inept. A lot of people try to sell philosophy these days by saying that it gives you transferable thinking skills. But the evidence from Russell and Wittgenstein seems to be that there aren't many transferable skills there. They seemed to be very good at thinking about certain things but not necessarily any good at all at thinking about others. Do you think that looking at the lives of these people does undermine the idea that philosophy teaches you a transferable skill?

Not entirely, no. But it's certainly true that a lot of Russell's work outside philosophy is just rubbish, ill-considered and sloppily written. People talk about what a wonderful writer Russell was, but of the literally thousands of articles he published, there are quite a lot which are badly written, badly thought out, where he gives vent to his prejudices, he doesn't consider relevant aspects of the question he is dealing with and so on. His writings on politics, marriage and ethics – there's an awful lot there which is just bad.

Does this undermine the idea that if you're good at philosophy you'll be good at thinking through other things? Not entirely. What it does show is that you can't adopt the kind of arrogance that Russell adopted and say, I've thought about the most difficult problem that there is, and so working out who should be the next president of the United States will be a piece of cake. It doesn't work like that. But neither does it mean that thinking clearly is a waste of time or that studying philosophy doesn't help you think clearly. Studying philosophy does help you think clearly, but then whether you do think clearly or not is a matter of will.

The question of how he published such poor work troubles you throughout the book. But you don't seem to have satisfied yourself with an answer.

No. There's not going to be a simple answer, but one thing is this: Could he have written better about politics, about marriage, about happiness? Yes, he could. So the question is not why he was so limited in those areas, but why he set himself such low standards.

But do you really think he could have written much better about marriage? It did seem that when it came to conducting his personal life, he basically lacked a certain set of people skills. It wasn't

anything to do with his lack of reasoning abilities. He just didn't seem to understand personal relationships and the manner in which matters of the heart affect people, in the kind of way that is necessary to be able to talk about these things. He didn't have the emotional insight into people which would enable him to apply his intellectual abilities in a constructive way.

I think that's largely true. The other thing is that he was to a certain extent hampered by his philosophical abilities, or at least by his philosophy, which drew too rigid a distinction between the contrast you made – affairs of the heart, on one hand, and reasoning, on the other. Russell felt, I think, that anything that couldn't be satisfied by a valid deductive argument was just settled by the whim of feeling. That is to say, he is too ready to assume that feelings are just irrational and there's no doing anything about it. So if he wakes up one morning and discovers that he's not in love with Alys, that's it. All he can do is live with that and then get Alys to live with that. The idea that one could reason this through, ask what's happening with his marriage to Alys, why this sudden break, all those sort of things don't occur to him because he assumes that affairs of the heart are essentially and irretrievably irrational.

You talked earlier about Russell's arrogance, that having thought about the hardest questions imaginable, he had carte blanche to talk about anything else. Do you think that's an arrogance which is not untypical of philosophers?

I'm not sure. You might say that one of the reasons why philosophy is so unexciting at the moment is that British philosophers have become too humble in that respect. They work away on their little problems and they're reluctant to say anything about other things. Even the ones that do, do so in their spare time. They write their philosophy books

and then they publish journalism, and they don't attach much importance to the latter. Or if they do, it exhibits some of the arrogance you speak of – here am I a logician and I'm going to tell you what to think about the current debate about education, and so on. But in general, I think philosophy has become too isolated from life outside the academy.

I want to finish by turning to the future a bit. You're still pretty much a one-man ghetto, in that though others with philosophical backgrounds have written biographies of philosophers, what you've done with the three books is pretty much unique. Do you see any sign that as a discipline within the subject, philosophical biography might be taken more seriously?

There are signs of that, yes. One sign of that is the number of conferences I get invited to devoted to the subject of biography and philosophers. They tend to be interdisciplinary. They tend to involve people from philosophy and English departments, with some people from history, politics and whatever. There also tend to be one-man ghettos in disciplines such as politics who write biographies of political figures. I've been to five or six conferences – and thinking about philosophy in relation to biography, particularly in the States, is becoming a tiny little subgenre. I'm not entirely comfortable with that, because for me, one of the virtues of biography is that it's a non-theoretical enterprise. If you then start contributing to the theory of biography you've pulled the rug from under yourself.

That's interesting, because some people would say there is a philosophical question about how one can tell the truth of a life.

I don't mean at all that there aren't interesting philosophical issues to do with biography. Of course there are, they're interesting and they

interest me and I have written on them and so on. I just mean that the idea of a theory of biography is appalling.

Are you working on anyone else now?

I'm going to write a book about philosophy and biography and a book about Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics. But the next biography I'm going to write is of a scientist, Robert Oppenheimer. It seems to me that one could do a philosophical biography of Oppenheimer. What makes a philosophical biography? Sartre wrote philosophical biographies of literary figures, Baudelaire and Flaubert. What makes something a philosophical biography needn't be that it's the biography of a philosopher, just somebody where there is some dynamic, an interaction to reveal and describe, between somebody's preoccupation with ideas and their life. I think that's the case with Oppenheimer. What makes a biography philosophical is that it shows the interplay between thought and life.

Select Bibliography

- 'Philosophical biography: the very idea', in *Wittgenstein: Biography and Philosophy*, edited by J. Klagge, Cambridge University Press, 2001
Bertrand Russell Volume 1: The Spirit of Solitude, Jonathan Cape, 1996
Bertrand Russell Volume 2: The Ghost of Madness, Jonathan Cape, 2000
 'Was Russell an analytical philosopher?', *Ratio*, 9: 3, 1996
Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius, Jonathan Cape, 1990